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Carl Jung and the Psychology of Dreams – Messages from the Unconscious

“We also live in our dreams, we do not live only by day. Sometimes we accomplish our greatest deeds in dreams.”

Carl Jung, The Red Book

Are dreams the product of random brain activity, or a side effect of the mind consolidating its memories? Are they, as Sigmund Freud suggested, the expression of repressed wishes and desires? Or is there something richer and more meaningful to dreams that escapes the notice of many in the modern day? Carl Jung believed there was, and in this video, we are going to explore why dreams are of vital importance to our mental and physical health and how the art of dream interpretation can revitalize our life.

“It is only in modern times that the dream, this fleeting and insignificant looking product of the psyche, has met with such profound contempt. Formerly it was esteemed as a harbinger of fate, a portent and comforter, a messenger of the gods. Now we see it as the emissary of the unconscious, whose task it is to reveal the secrets that are hidden from the conscious mind, and this it does with astounding completeness.”

Carl Jung, Two Essays on Analytical Psychology

The interpretation of dreams was an integral part of Jung’s therapeutic approach. According to his own estimate, he analyzed no less than 80,000 dreams. In his Seminar on Dreams, Jung stated that *“dreams are messages sent up from the unconscious”*. And so to grasp the significance of dreams, we must understand how Jung conceived of the unconscious psyche. In a lecture given in 1934, Jung wrote that *“It is as if our consciousness were...a ship on the great sea of the unconscious.”*

(*Carl Jung, ETH Zurich*) The fate of a ship is partially determined by the activity of the sea and likewise the direction of our life is highly influenced by the unconscious. Furthermore, just as the sea contains resources, treasures, and dangers that are not easily seen from the surface, so too potentials for good and evil are hidden in our unconscious depths. Psychological development, according to Jung, is facilitated by bringing unconscious contents into the light of consciousness, for this enriches our conscious personality, increases our knowledge, and promotes psychological wholeness. “*One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.*” (*Carl Jung, Alchemical Studies*) More than any other phenomenon dreams can facilitate this process as they act as a window into the unconscious mind, or as Jung explains:

“...the dream is a spontaneous self-portrayal, in symbolic form, of the actual situation in the unconscious...The dream is specifically the utterance of the unconscious.”

Carl Jung, Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche

Paying attention to our dreams, and therein making more of the unconscious conscious, bestows many benefits. One of which is that dreams contain insights which in waking life we are unable, or unwilling, to see.

“When we sleep the soul is lit up completely by many eyes; with them we can see everything that we could not see in the daytime.”

Aeschylus

Intuitions or gut feelings that are not consciously processed, subtle hunches about the true character of other people, as well as blind spots and self-deceptions that are inhibiting our development – all are examples of insights which our unconscious can reveal in dreams. This ability of a dream to disclose knowledge otherwise unavailable to waking consciousness is why throughout history, in the words of Jung, “*the dream has been regarded as a truth-telling oracle.*” Or as Jung explains in more detail:

“The unconscious is the dark being within that hears what our conscious ears do not hear, and sees what our conscious eyes do not perceive...We only become aware of this unheard hearing, this unseen seeing, when the unconscious sends us these forgotten images in dreams.”

Carl Jung, ETH Zurich 1933-41

As windows into the unconscious, dreams also provide us with information about the health, or sickness, of our body. For the unconscious is intimately connected to the biology of the body and involved in regulating the functioning of organs. It is thus capable of detecting subtle abnormalities in the body, and it is not unusual for the unconscious to disclose these abnormalities in dreams, long before any overt symptoms show. Or as the Jungian psychoanalyst James Hall explains:

“It is by no means an easy matter to make organic diagnoses from dream material, although there are many striking examples of such predictions: the dream of an inner “explosion” preceding the leaking of an aortic aneurysm, the appearance of dream figures with gall bladder disease prior to that illness being suspected in the dreamer, etc.”

James Hall, Jungian Dream Interpretation

Dreams can also warn us of the type of future that may manifest if we continue in our errant ways.

“Dreams prepare, announce, or warn about certain situations, often long before they actually happen. This is not necessarily a miracle or a precognition. Most crises or dangerous situations have a long incubation, only the conscious mind is not aware of it. Dreams can betray the secret.”

Carl Jung, The Symbolic Life

Jung provides an example of a dream of this type. Jung’s colleague, an amateur mountaineer, told Jung of the following dream: He was climbing a mountain, and the higher he climbed, the better he felt. When he reached the summit of the mountain he wanted to continue to climb and so he stepped off the summit into thin air, and suddenly he awoke.

Jung intuitively felt this dream to be a warning from the unconscious. He implored his colleague to take extra precautions on any future climbs or avoid them altogether. But the man did not heed the advice. Three months later the man went climbing, and in the words of Jung:

“A guide standing below saw him literally step out into the air while descending a rock face. He fell on the head of his friend, who was waiting lower down, and both were dashed to pieces far below.”

Carl Jung, Practice of Psychotherapy

Dreams also play an important role in the creative process. We know from the history of philosophy, science, art, and literature, that many great creations and discoveries have been inspired by dreams. A dream informed the Russian chemist Dmitry Mendeleyev of the correct order of the elements based on atomic weight. August Kekule was shown the structure of the benzene ring in a dream. The basic theme of Robert Louis Stevenson’s novel *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* came to him in a dream. While Carl Jung stated that all his greatest ideas were conceived in dreams:

“In the end, the only events in my life worth telling are...inner experiences, amongst which I include my dreams and visions. These form the *prima materia* of my scientific work. They were the fiery magma out of which the stone that had to be worked was crystallized.”

Carl Jung, Memories, Dreams, Reflections

Dreams also have the capacity to break us free from a worldview that is too constricting and from a day-to-day existence that is too mundane. The dreams that do this are sometimes called “big dreams”. Big dreams are the highly significant dreams that are often remembered for a lifetime, and some even prove to be among the most valuable experiences of life. These are the dreams that possess a religious or spiritual significance, provide insights regarding the eternal questions of life, and even transform how we view ourselves and the world. Regarding the nature of big dreams, the Swiss psychologist Marie-Louise von Franz writes:

“Occasionally, one has a dream that is so remote from one’s life, so numinous (Jung’s favorite word for intensely moving experience), and so strange and uncanny that it does not seem to belong to the dreamer. It is like a visitation from another world, which in truth it is, the other world being the subterranean one of the unconscious. In ancient

times, and even today among some people, such dreams are regarded as messages from the gods or ancestral figures. These dreams are called “big” dreams by Jung.”

Marie-Louise von Franz, Dreams

Jung recounted a particularly striking big dream he experienced in 1944, just after suffering a heart attack that nearly killed him. Jung dreamt that he was walking in the wilderness and stumbled upon an old chapel. When he entered the chapel, he saw a yogi seated in the lotus position, in deep meditation. Jung continues:

“When I looked at him more closely, I realized that he had my face. I stared in profound fright, and awoke with the thought: ‘Aha, so he is the one who is meditating me. He has a dream and I am it.’ I knew that when he awakened, I would no longer be.”

Carl Jung, Memories, Dreams, Reflections

Big dreams are rare. Most people experience no more than a handful of them. The dreams that most frequently populate our sleeping hours are what Jung called compensatory dreams. The function of such dreams is to compensate, or correct for, the one-sidedness, errors, deviations, or other deficiencies of our conscious attitude. The more our conscious mind is ill-adapted to reality, and the more we are evading the tasks of life, the more we will be visited by dreams of a compensatory nature.

“When we pay attention to our dreams a self-regulating tendency in the soul comes into play which counterbalances the one-sidedness of consciousness or completes it so that a kind of wholeness and a life’s optimum is achieved.”

Marie-Louise von Franz, Dreams

A few examples will help clarify the nature of compensatory dreams. A man who is not fulfilling his duties as a father will have dreams that his children hate him in order to bring him to the awareness that he is avoiding one of the most important tasks of life. A woman who is too identified with her persona, or social personality, will have dreams of committing crimes or engaging in immoral behavior so that she sees the shadow, or unconscious dark side of her personality, that she needs to integrate to develop a more complete character. Or a man who approaches middle age, yet remains dependent on his parents, will have dreams that portray him as a helpless child, or as being smothered to death, so that he becomes aware of the perilous situation which his lack of independence is creating.

“...the compensatory function of dreams offers welcome assistance. [Compensatory dreams]...illuminate the patient’s situation in a way that can be exceedingly beneficial to health. They bring him memories, insights, experiences, awaken dormant qualities in the personality, and reveal the unconscious element in his relationships. So it seldom happens that anyone who has taken the trouble to work over his dreams...remains without enrichment and a broadening of his mental horizon.”

Carl Jung, Development of Personality

But if dreams are significant messages sent from the unconscious, why are they so difficult to decipher? Why doesn’t the unconscious present these messages to us in a form that is easier for our

conscious mind to understand? While the conscious mind is capable of rationality and logic, the unconscious is by nature irrational – it does not operate by the laws of logic and it communicates primarily in symbols, not words.

“As a plant produces its flower, so the psyche creates its symbols. Every dream is evidence of this process.”

Carl Jung, The Symbolic Life

The fact that the conscious and unconscious mind communicate in different languages explains why dreams are enigmatic. Yet just because we do not fully understand the meaning of the symbols presented to us in dreams, does not mean they do not influence us. For just as fairy tales, myths, religious teachings and rituals transcend rational understanding yet have influenced human beings for thousands of years, dreams can influence the course of our life even if we do not fully understand them.

“Dreams pave the way for life, and they determine you without you understanding their language.”

Carl Jung, The Red Book

Or as Jung explained elsewhere:

“It is often objected that the [dream] must be ineffective unless the dream is understood. This is not so certain, however, for many things can be effective without being understood. But there is no doubt that we can enhance its effect considerably by understanding the dream, and this is often necessary because the voice of the unconscious so easily goes unheard.”

Carl Jung, Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche

To understand dreams and thereby enhance their effects, we should make a habit of recording our dreams first thing in the morning – for memories of dreams quickly fade as we go about our day. When we come across a dream which we feel is particularly significant, we can engage in what Jung called dream amplification. Amplifying a dream involves reflecting on the dream and weaving ideas, concepts, and associations around it. This might include recalling memories that we think are related to the dream, allowing our intuition to freely speculate on its meaning, or thinking about whether the dream is related to a task we are not fulfilling or if it is compensating for a conscious attitude that is ill adapted to the demands of life. In interpreting a big dream, amplification is aided by knowledge of mythology and religion, for big dreams are often composed of the recurring symbols and motifs that are found cross-culturally in religions and myths. We will know that we have stumbled upon a correct dream interpretation when, in the words of Jung,

“...the interpretation “clicks”; when there is the feeling that it absolutely hits the fact, one knows one is on the right track.”

Carl Jung, Seminar on Dreams

Or as von Franz elaborates regarding Jung’s method of dream amplification:

“Jung did not interpret his dreams by immediately forming a clear idea of what they meant; instead, he carried them around within himself, lived with them inwardly, as it were, and asked questions of them. If he came across something in a book or in an outer experience which reminded him of a dream image, he would add it to that image, so to speak, so that a fabric of ideas developed, with a constantly increasing richness.”

Marie-Louise von Franz, Dreams

If we pay more attention to our dreams and devote more time to understanding them, we will possess an effective antidote against many of the collective sicknesses of our age. For in Jung's analysis, much of what plagues modern society, be it endemic levels of neurotic illnesses, mass-delusions, a widespread level of cowardice amongst the general population, an extreme susceptibility to propaganda, or a sheeplike obedience to corrupt authority figures, is the result of a dangerous disconnect between the conscious mind and the unconscious. Modern man has lost touch with his instincts, with the basic facts of human nature, and with a commonsense wisdom that is millions of years old. As it is dreams that help forge a connection to this ancient ground of our being, the more we pay attention to our dreams, the more we will find the inner strength and intuitive wisdom needed to thrive in a sick society. Or as Jung explains:

“Dreams are impartial, spontaneous products of the unconscious psyche, outside the control of the will.”, explains Jung. “They are pure nature; they show us the unvarnished, natural truth, and are therefore fitted, as nothing else is, to give us back an attitude that accords with our basic human nature when our consciousness has strayed too far from its foundations and runs into an impasse.”

Carl Jung, Civilization in Transition